

VZCZCXRO6065
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHTU #1404/01 2951500
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 221500Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4015
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001404

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL (JOHNSTONE)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/21/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION HUNGER STRIKE ENDS FOLLOWING COMPROMISE
WITH LANDLORD

REF: A. TUNIS 1399

[1](#)B. TUNIS 1371

[1](#)C. TUNIS 1004

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP)
Secretary General Maya Jribi and former Secretary General

SIPDIS

Nejib Chebbi on October 20 ended their month-long hunger strike, which had been undertaken to protest their party's near simultaneous eviction from nine regional offices and its national headquarters (reftels). On October 20, Jribi and Chebbi called Poloffs to say their landlord and the PDP agreed to amend their lease, allowing them to remain in their party headquarters. Jribi and Chebbi ended their hunger strike, but said they would continue to work using other means to advocate freedom of expression and freedom of association. End Summary.

PDP and Landlord Reach Compromise Solution

[1](#)2. (C) As hinted at in newspaper articles on October 19 (Ref A), the PDP's Tunis landlord contacted Jribi and Chebbi on October 20 to broach a compromise to stave off the PDP's imminent eviction from its national headquarters. According to Jribi and Chebbi, who called Poloffs on October 20, their landlord offered to renegotiate their lease. In the space of a few hours, the PDP and the landlord agreed to a lease amendment stipulating that the premises would be used by both the PDP and its newspaper, al-Mowqif. The lease terms also included a rent increase. The PDP held a press conference on October 20 to announce the deal and the end of the hunger strike. Press conference attendees were reportedly singing and dancing in jubilation as they exited the building.

International and Domestic Support

[1](#)3. (C) Since reaching a compromise with their landlord, Jribi and Chebbi have repeatedly expressed appreciation for the Embassy's support throughout the month-long crisis. As Department is aware, the Ambassador visited the hunger strikers on September 28 to express the United States' commitment to freedom of expression and freedom of association. The Ambassador also discussed the issue with

GOT officials, including Tunisian External Communication Agency (ACTE) Director General Osama Ramdani. Embossos visited the hunger strikers regularly, and encouraged other diplomatic missions to do the same. The PDP also benefited from a variety of international expressions of support: in addition to visits by several European diplomatic missions, the EU sent a letter to Foreign Minister Abdallah expressing humanitarian concern about the well-being of the hunger strikers (Ref A). NGOs in Canada and France also sent open letters to President Ben Ali calling for a resolution. French Senator Monique Cerisier ben Guiga also wrote to Ben Ali in support of the PDP, as did Helene Flautre, President of the European Parliament,s Sub-Commission on Human Rights, who held a joint press conference with Jribi and Chebbi earlier in the day on October 20.

¶4. (C) Tunisian civil society also rallied around the hunger strikers, notwithstanding the fact that some activists had reservations about their tactics. In addition to the attendance of Mustapha Ben Jafaar, Secretary General of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberty opposition party, at their press conferences, the PDP received letters and visits from other intellectuals and representatives independent political parties and labor unions. Representatives of several Tunisian NGOs -- authorized and unauthorized -- also visited the hunger strikers, even creating a new "National Committee for the Support of Maya Jribi and Nejib Chebbi and for the Right to a Headquarters and Access to Public Halls".

Comment

¶5. (C) There is little doubt that the GOT had a hand both in encouraging the PDP eviction threats that led to this crisis, as well as in prompting the landlord to renegotiate the lease to resolve it. We attribute the GOT,s about-face

TUNIS 00001404 002 OF 002

to a combination of factors, perhaps the most important of which was the specter of the emaciated hunger strikers casting a pall over next month,s festivities marking Ben Ali,s 20 years in power. The combination of sustained domestic and international backing behind the principle that opposition parties should have freedom to maneuver also sent a powerful message that became impossible for the GOT to ignore. It remains to be seen, however, whether the episode will change GOT behavior with regard to other civil society groups, which have also been subject to repeated harassment.
GODEC